

COVID-19 Will Change Public Schools Forever

Cassian Stylus

replying to [The Editors's piece](#)

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American Mind

What is to be done?

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Of all the unexpected blessings from our quarantine, let's celebrate that our children are, for now, freed from the programming we call school. If only Covid-19 would permanently dismantle the system which perpetuates this barbaric institution.

Consider the massive lie at the foundation of the latest nationwide standards: School is for "college and career readiness." Will any child really be ill-prepared for their job as a barista (or engineer, or nurse, or whatever) if they miss their fourth quarter of senior year, not reading *Hamlet* SparkNotes the night before the Act 3 Quiz, and not cramming into their short-term memory a handful of facts for an Econ test? Will ignorance of how a "bicameral legislature" is structured really affect one's ability to sell insurance?

Covid-19 will finally reveal to the majority of Americans that our entire educational system is a vicious scandal. The students who will miss months of their formal schooling will not be any less educated than if they had been kept locked in their mind-numbing schools. In fact, their time at home will be to their educational benefit, even if they learn nothing at all.

This is not hyperbole.

I have spent a decade in education, teaching in junior high, high school, and university. Modern educational practices and institutions produce students who are bored, cynical, skeptical, and narcissistic. *Schools deform their students*. That's why it's better for kids to stay at home and learn nothing during this quarantine than it is for them to go to school. Schools make kids into worse people than if they had never gone at all.

Look at the Unschooling Movement, especially at the Sudbury Valley Schools. These are nothing but laissez-faire play zones for kids 5-18, and they boast equivalent results regarding college acceptance and completion as do mainstream industrial schooling. Apart from trade schools, what we typically call school does not and cannot prepare anyone for college or career.

Don't believe me? Check out the [work](#) of [psychologist Peter Gray](#). Still don't believe me? Read Bryan Caplan's [kill shot](#). Still don't believe me? You must be a school administrator.

So, the charade is over—I hope. "College and career readiness" cannot justify the

billions of dollars and the billions of hours of wasted human energy spent on our education industry.

Consider how students react to their school closing. Or just think of your own snow days as a student. They may regret time lost with friends or extracurriculars, but the actual schooling? Who misses vocab quizzes, five-paragraph essays, Cornell notes, bells, grades, forced group activities? Maybe future technocrats and the sentient algorithms which will one day replace them, but no one who has fought to keep their humanity alive year after year, class after class, bell after bell. The annihilation of modern schooling cannot come soon enough.

Beginning Again

The Unschooling Movement is valuable insofar as it helps reveal the lie of modern education's presumptions. But it is deficient. A true education, one founded on truth and reason, is a beautiful thing. Unschooling gets us back to zero. That's something—at least they're not deforming students like modern schools do. But we need to rethink what education should be, apart from the lies about "college and career readiness" and beyond the laissez-faire presumption of unschooling.

Our rethinking must begin with this question: What does it mean to be human? After all, I've said that modern schools "deform" students. So how ought they to *form* them? What are schools meant for, anyways? We can't figure out what to form students into until we know what humans are, and what humans are for.

Modern schooling offers false and contradictory answers to these questions.

First, modern education operates as though humans are essentially computers with hair. We are treated as if we simply need the right programming (i.e. teaching strategies and curriculum) developed by expert programmers ("education" researchers at elite universities) in order to run programs efficiently (produce the desired results: higher test scores, higher reading levels, etc.).

Academic skills are isolated, like strings of code in an algorithm, then measured, diagnosed, prescribed this or that pedagogy or intervention, then tested again and tweaked ("iterated" as software programmers would say) until the student produces what the bureaucrats want.

No wonder kids hate school.

Students are treated like glass, plastic, and silicon boxes that need their algorithms fiddled with—rendering them utterly miserable—and yet at the same time, they're treated like gods. But not in a good, Athanasian "God became man so that man might become god" way, nor even in a pagan Roman way that deifies its emperors. They're treated like whatever gods exist in a system of self-referential materialism.

"Man is the measure of all things," so students are told to "speak their truth," and are never told that there is a Truth. When teaching a challenging topic, teachers provide students differing points of view and then "let the students decide for themselves." Of course, the conflicting decisions students reach and "truths" they speak are always of equal value and students are denied any guiding principles, except that their own conclusions are always valid.

So, students implicitly come to disbelieve the very thing Aristotle says we must affirm as the basis of all knowledge: the law of non-contradiction. A proposition cannot affirm and deny the same thing at the same time ("The earth is round and not-round"), nor can it implicitly deny what it explicitly affirms ("I am telling a lie"), yet students are told the "truth" that there is no Truth.

What does this amount to? “You are gods; you are the source of their own moral authority and truth.” Yet this authority comes not from themselves but from their teachers.

The conflicting anthropologies of modern school should be clear: On one hand students are treated like computers that need some programming work done on them, and on the other they are told that they are their own gods. And we expect modern students to become something other than cynical, braindead narcissists?

Identity First

A properly re-ordered education will start with the correct anthropology. We must understand who we are and who our students are before we can talk about education.

We are composites of material body and immaterial soul. The soul animates our material body, giving us our essence. And the soul contains within itself three powers—reason (our head), spirit (our chest), and appetites (our belly), which are in constant conflict with each other, each striving for dominance.

In a rightly ordered soul, “the head rules the belly through the chest,” in the words of C.S. Lewis. Reason is privileged for it discloses to us the true nature of reality. It ensures our spirit delights in true and proper sentiments and our physical appetites are subordinated to transcendent desires for justice and wisdom. A rightly ordered soul strives after the fullness of Truth. It delights in the Beautiful. It demands virtuous conduct, leading to the fullness of our humanity, our Happiness.

With the correct anthropology, we understand education as the process by which we rightly order and form souls. A successful education will not be determined by test scores but by the degree to which students love what is good and hate what is bad, the degree to which their minds rule their appetites through their spirit. It will be displayed in the sincerity with which students seek after truth, reasoning together and with their teachers in mutual love and humility.

A rightly ordered school values *formation* over *information*. Instead of blasting students with scraps of knowledge on a smattering of subjects, it forms students in principles of truth. When students are young, it allows them to delight in their senses, experiencing the beauty of nature and of art. It will ignite their moral imagination with the great stories and symbols of the past. As students grow older, it develops the practice of true philosophy, the love of wisdom. Students will find their minds expanding as they participate in the great conversations of timeless questions.

Formation in Person

The quarantine reveals this other sham of modern schooling: If schools are for the giving and receiving of information, why not just do it all online, on the great Information Superhighway that renders information-sharing as friction-less as possible?

Soul formation is a human activity requiring human interaction rooted in love and truth. Happily for us, developing one’s soul will be more likely to produce those “learning outcomes” desired by highly-paid technocrats than trying to program them in students as if they were computers. A well-formed soul will desire knowledge, and so will love learning. “Learning outcomes” are the fruit of a long, studious cultivation of one’s interiority, illumined by Truth, fertilized by the classics, watered by Socratic discourse. They are not programmed by teaching strategies, canned curriculum, or interventions.

Teachers must themselves be properly grounded in the tradition of the great conversations, starting with the Ancients. The schools of education and teacher credentialing programs, which have a stranglehold on educational reform, must be

demolished. A teacher's authority will not come from an arbitrary state-issued credential but from their own attentiveness to the great teachers of the past. A teacher is qualified by their love of truth and their love for their students.

Once we as the educators are properly rooted in truth, we will understand and respect what millions of parents are relearning during the quarantine: Parents are the first teachers and homes are the first schools. Students should not be isolated from their families and viewed as atomistic individuals to be programmed into proper thinking. A student can only be properly educated according to their nature, and schools must respect the natural authority of the parents. Schools work alongside families for the edification of their children.

Before the pandemic, the seeds of a rightly-ordered education had already been sown. Examples for the future may be found in schools within the [Association of Classical Christian Schools](#), in the homeschooling platform of the [Schole Academy](#), or in the charter networks of the [Chesterton Academies](#) in Minnesota, the [Great Hearts Academies](#) in Arizona, and I'm sure many others of which I am unaware.

And these schools must also diligently uproot the stubborn modernist presuppositions within themselves. We have all been steeped so thoroughly in modern schooling, we must together look to the great teachers of the past for a way forward.

Returning to the *status quo ante* once the virus has had its way with us won't be a recovery. It will be a tragedy.

[Cassian Stylus](#) is the editor of America First.

✉ [@CassianStylus](#)